

Fight For Fairness

No matter your skin colour, sexuality, religion or anything else, the United Kingdom is one of the best places in the world to live.

The British story has been driven from its earliest days by the desire for liberty, agency, and fairness.

It is the notion that in Britain you will have the opportunity to succeed at whatever you wish to do professionally, that you can be whoever you want to be. Dress however you want to dress. Love whoever you wish to love and achieve your dreams.

But we must be honest. Our story is not yet complete. Our equality journey is not yet finished.

For too many people, particularly in places beyond the South East, opportunity is diminished.

For years, successive governments have either pretended that all opportunity was equal or failed to come up with proper solutions, paying lip service to a problem that has festered for decades.

It was this government that finally tore down this social taboo when we were elected to level-up the country and toppled the Red Wall turning it Blue.

We were elected partly on the promise of fixing the scourge of geographic inequality, and ensuring equal opportunity for all. There are still too many cases where your destination in life is decided by where you started it. So today, I am outlining a new approach to equality in this country.

This will be founded firmly on Conservative values.

It will be about individual dignity and humanity, not quotas and targets, or equality of outcome.

It will reject the approach taken by the Left, captured as they are by identity politics and loud lobby groups.

It will focus fiercely on fixing geographic inequality, addressing the real problems people face in their everyday lives using evidence and data.

If you were born in Wolverhampton or Darlington, you have been under-served by successive governments. No more.

Things must change and things will change.

This new approach to equality will run through the DNA of this government.

The moral and practical case for equality

For me, it is a moral and practical mission.

Just as our forebears fought for change, we must fight for change again – challenging what is unfair and unjust today.

It is not right that having a particular surname or accent can sometimes make it harder to get a job.

It is appalling that pregnant women suffer discrimination at work. Or that women may be encouraged to dress in a certain way to get ahead.

Or that some employers overlook the capabilities of people with disabilities.

It is outrageous in the 21st century that LGBT people still face harassment in public spaces.

As well as being a moral problem, it is shameful we are squandering so much talent.

- If women opened businesses at the same rate as men – we could add £250bn to the economy.
- If people of every ethnic group were fully represented across the labour market, that would mean an extra £24 billion of income a year.
- If businesses were fully accessible for disabled consumers, they could benefit from an estimated £274 billion a year in spending power.

We can ill afford to waste this potential as we recover from Covid and build back better.

Equality rooted in Conservative values

Our new approach to equality will be based on the core principles of freedom, choice, opportunity, and individual humanity and dignity.

We will move well beyond the narrow focus of protected characteristics and deliver real change that benefits people across our United Kingdom.

We will do this in three ways.

First, by delivering fairness through modernisation, increased choice and openness.

Second, by concentrating on data and research, rather than on campaigning and listening to those with the loudest voices.

And third, by taking our biggest and broadest look yet at the challenges we

face, including the all too neglected scourge of geographic inequality.

Now is the time to root the equality debate in the real concerns people face, like affording a home, getting to work, going out safely at night, ending discrimination in our offices, factories and shop floors, and improving our schools so every child has a good chance in life.

It is our duty to deliver, because if right-thinking people do not lead the fight for fairness, then it will be led by those whose ideas don't work.

The failed ideas of the Left

The ideas that have dominated the equality debate have been long in the making.

As a comprehensive school student in Leeds in the 1980s, I was struck by the lip service that was paid to equality by the City Council while children from disadvantaged backgrounds were let down.

While we were taught about racism and sexism, there was too little time spent making sure everyone could read and write.

These ideas have their roots in post-modernist philosophy – pioneered by Foucault – that put societal power structures and labels ahead of individuals and their endeavours.

In this school of thought, there is no space for evidence, as there is no objective view – truth and morality are all relative.

Rather than promote policies that would have been a game-changer for the disenfranchised like better education and business opportunities, there was a preference for symbolic gestures.

Even now, authorities rush to embrace symbols – for example, Birmingham City Council naming new streets “Diversity Grove” and “Equality Road” – as if that counts as real change.

Underlying this is the soft bigotry of low expectations, where people from certain backgrounds are not expected to reach high standards.

This diminishes their individual humanity, dignity and agency.

And it hasn't delivered the progress it promised.

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In addition, this focus on groups at the expense of individuals has led to harmful unintended consequences.

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Study after study has shown that unconscious bias training does not improve equality, and in fact can backfire by reinforcing stereotypes and

exacerbating biases.

That's why this week we announced we will no longer be using it in government or civil service.

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By contrast, the Conservative Party has elected two female leaders, and has a Cabinet with the highest ever level of ethnic minority representation.

We have done this not by positively discriminating, but by positively empowering people who want to go into politics and opening up our Party to people of all backgrounds. Because when you choose on the basis of protected characteristics, you end up excluding other people.

1. Fairness, not favouritism

Fairness, not favouritism, drives our approach to equality.

Too often, the equality debate has been dominated by a small number of unrepresentative voices, and by those who believe people are defined by their protected characteristic, and not by their individual character.

This school of thought says that if you are not from an 'oppressed group' then you are not entitled to an opinion, and that this debate is not for you.

I wholeheartedly reject this approach.

Equality is something everybody in the United Kingdom should care about and something all of us have a stake in.

So, I am calling time on "pink bus" feminism, where women are left to fix sexism and campaign for childcare.

Rather than virtue signalling, or campaigning, this government is focused on delivering a fairer and more transparent society that works for all and that delivers genuine equality of opportunity.

The work of American academic Iris Bohnet shows that modernising and making organisations more transparent is the best way to tackle inequality.

When things are opaque, it benefits those who know how to game the system.

We know that when companies publish their wage ranges, it leads to more equal starting points for men and women.

We know that automatic promotions based on performance help level up opportunities for women in the workplace, overcoming the barriers that make women less likely to put themselves forward for promotion.

And we know that evidence-driven recruitment in a clear and open structure is more effective than using informal and ad hoc networks.

On the other hand, techniques like unconscious bias training, quotas and

diversity statements do nothing to make the workplace fundamentally fairer.

By driving reforms that increase competition, boost transparency and improve choice, we can open up opportunities.

This is the approach we will be taking across government.

It is fundamentally important that the role of equality minister is held by someone who also has another cabinet job, as I do with trade.

This ensures equality is not siloed, but is instead the responsibility of the whole government and all our elected representatives.

For example, the Academies Act 2010 meant good free schools were established across England and more children had the opportunity of a great education. The 1980 Housing Act empowered over two million people to get on the housing ladder, and the independent taxation of women in 1988 gave wives control of their own money.

All of these reforms promoted equality by giving people greater agency over their own lives and making systems more transparent.

For example, we know that students from poorer backgrounds are more likely to achieve better grades than they were predicted, and they lose out in the current university admissions system which is based on predicted grades.

That is why Gavin Williamson is right to base the university admissions system on the actual grades students achieve, making sure that students from lower income backgrounds have a fairer shot at university.

In the workplace, we know that flexible working improves productivity and helps people to combine work with other responsibilities.

That is why I will be working with Alok Sharma, the Business Secretary, to enable more flexible working – not just as a necessity amid the Covid crisis but to empower employees.

The best way to reduce unfairness in our society is through opening up opportunities for all.

This is the level playing field we should be talking about.

And we are going to make sure that this level playing field is properly enforced.

That is why I am appointing a new chair and a wide variety of commissioners to the Equality and Human Rights Commission to drive this agenda forward.

I am proud we have Baroness Kishwer Falkner, David Goodhart, Jessica Butcher, Su-Mei Thompson and Lord Ribeiro, all of whom are committed to equality and ready to challenge dangerous groupthink.

Under this new leadership, the EHRC will focus on enforcing fair treatment

for all, rather than freelance campaigning.

2. Facts, not fiction

To make our society more equal, we need the equality debate to be led by facts not by fashion.

Time and time again, we see politicians making their own evidence-free judgements.

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My superb colleague Kemi Badenoch is leading work on the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, established by the Prime Minister.

We should heed the warning from its chair, Dr Tony Sewell, who wrote last month that they have uncovered “a perception of racism that is often not supported by evidence” and that “wrong perceptions sow mistrust”.

This does not mean we don't recognise people's stories about their individual lives or believe that their experiences of discrimination are not real. It means that we can and must have an equality agenda that is driven by evidence.

Today I am announcing that the Equality Hub will embark on the Government's biggest, broadest and most comprehensive equality data project yet, and it will closely coordinate with the work of CRED (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities).

Over the coming months, we will look across the UK to identify where people are held back and what the biggest barriers are.

We will not limit our fight for fairness to the nine protected characteristics laid out in the 2010 Equality Act, which include sex, race and gender reassignment.

While it is true people in these groups suffer discrimination, the focus on protected characteristics has led to a narrowing of the equality debate that overlooks socio-economic status and geographic inequality.

This means some issues – particularly those facing white working-class children – are neglected.

This project will broaden the drive for equality and get to the heart of the barriers people face. It will report its initial findings in the Summer.

In addition to race, sex, disability and religion, it will also look at issues around geography, community and socio-economic background.

It will deliver a new life-path analysis of equality from the perspective of the individual, not groups. Using longitudinal data sets will help us understand where the real problems lie.

3. Geographic Inequality

There is a deeper wage gap between London and the regions than between men and women, with an average full-time salary a third higher in the capital than the North East of England.

There are lower employment rates, pay packets and life expectancy across the North than the South. At the same time, average median hourly earnings in the South West are only just over two thirds of those in London.

That is why the equality agenda must be prosecuted with fierce determination and clarity of purpose up and down the country, not just in London boardrooms and Whitehall offices.

Whether that is making the case for free schools in deprived areas or using data to help regional businesses attract investment.

We will use the power of evidence to drive reform and give people access to the facts so they can push for change.

We will drive this action from the North of England, where we will be moving the Equality Hub.

And I am delighted to announce that we are also taking on sponsorship of the Social Mobility Commission, to give this agenda real teeth and coherence.

The whole of government will be – and is – totally committed to this agenda. The Treasury is revising its Green Book so that it judges infrastructure investment fairly across the UK, no longer seeing – for example – faster broadband as a better investment in Surrey than South Lanarkshire.

The Department for Education is going to extra lengths to create academies and free schools outside London. And in housing, we are working to increase opportunities for home ownership across the country.

This is just the start. There is much more we will be doing to make our country fairer and give people agency over their own lives.

This is not limited to the UK

This fight for fairness goes beyond our shores.

Next year, the United Kingdom will use its presidency of the G7 to ramp up its work worldwide with like-minded allies to champion freedom, human rights and the equality of opportunity.

The UK is co-leading the new global Generation Equality Action Coalition on Gender Based Violence, and co-chairing the Equal Rights Coalition.

In that role, we will be holding our International LGBT conference, on the theme of Safe to Be Me.

We are working internationally to bring an end to child marriage and are

supporting international programmes to end the abhorrent practice of Female Genital Mutilation.

We need to make progress across the world and at home as a fairer world and a fairer Britain go hand in hand.

Taking the right approach to deliver real change

At this vital time in our country's history, we must make sure everyone has a chance to succeed in modern Britain.

That is why we cannot waste time on misguided, wrong-headed and ultimately destructive ideas that take agency away from people.

Instead, we will drive an agenda that empowers people and actively challenges discrimination.

We will use evidence to inform policy and drive change.

And we will focus on increasing openness and transparency, fixing the system rather than the results.

Together, we will build back a better society and lead the new fight for fairness.